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Women's Knowledge Systems and Peace building among the pastoral communities of northern Kenya: A Special Reference to West Pokot County

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Women's Knowledge Systems in Peace Building have been "othered" as informal and characterized as belonging to the private space. This study aimed at interrogating the influence of women's knowledge systems in peace building among the pastoral communities of northern Kenya with a special focus on the Pokots of West Pokot County, Kenya. Specifically the study examined the nature of women's knowledge systems in pastoral communities in relation to peace and security, assessed the ways in which women negotiate their culture in their effort to participate in Peace Building, explored the challenges that women faced as peace builders and evaluated the ways in which government and non-governmental organizations had used women's knowledge systems in peace and security issues. Exploratory design was used to address the objectives with a sample size of 250 respondents. The instruments of data collection included, questionnaires, KIIs, Observation Guides and FGDs. The study was grounded on Negative and Positive Peace Theory by Johan Galtung, Stable Peace Theory by Kenneth Boulding and Stand Point theory by Nancy Hartsock. The study found out that women in this county had knowledge that is central to peace and security as they were in charge of drought monitoring, food security, ethno medicine, ethno weather, market systems, land and water use. Due to their bilingual advantage women were good in negotiation and mediation and were therefore used as peace ambassadors and emissaries during conflicts. The women used art and dress to navigate their culture and ensure peace and security. The study recommended the need for well thought out programme of collecting and documenting the Women's Knowledge Systems to be shared out to other people and for prosperity. The study also recommended the need for all legal apparatus such as the constitution 2010, SDGs and Vision 2030 to recognize the importance of WKS in peace and security issues.

Key Words: Women's Knowledge Systems, Peace, Peace Building, Negotiation, Mediation

1.0 Introduction

Knowledge systems have been very important in understanding of phenomena and solving problems (Hamasi 2016a). For a long time western knowledge which has been hegemonic compared to the traditional knowledge has not been able to meet the expectations of people around the world and especially with regard to peace and security issues. As a result, studies by scholars like Odora- Hoppers (2002) have advocated for revival of interest and efforts relating to the contemporary application of the traditional knowledge systems in many spheres of life. Although knowledge systems from Africa have however been homogenized as indigenous knowledge whose production is managed by men, Amutabi (2012b) indicates that in most African societies, many roles are gender specific and that is why the expertise of an elder woman and an elder man is different but important.

Women's knowledge has enabled rural women to utilize traditional coping mechanisms and strategies to sustain and improve their livelihoods (Moore, 1986). Women's Knowledge Systems (WKS) includes ways of women knowing, meaning making and negotiating for Identity, voice, urgency (Swai, 2007). The knowledge is about preserving and sharing information for posterity and about preserving and recovering lost knowledge and giving meaning to societal context within which this is used such as food security, environmental conservation and relations between different groups.

Women's Knowledge systems have enabled women to act as mediators and middle figures in the domestic front. Since most women speak dual and triple dialect, they use the advantage to convey messages of peace. They know about food security issues and drought monitoring mechanism and as a result they have great inventory of society's food security (Kipkorir, 2008). The concept of *Leketyo* (a belt made from goat skin and tied around a pregnant woman's belly among the Pokot) gives a platform for this paper to interrogate the special women's knowledge systems applied in peace building among the pastoral communities of northern Kenya with a special focus on West Pokot County.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Women's knowledge systems especially in pastoralist communities have been marginalized (Naomi&Ridgewell, 2008). Studies on women and peace building by Nakanyike (2001) and Wako (2003) have pointed out that there has been little reporting of women's peace building activities largely due to patriarchal structures and institutions. The experiences of ordinary women at the grassroots and community levels have been largely omitted in the analysis of peacemaking and peace building in many African societies dominated by the 'Big Man' syndrome. This simply means that the contribution that women have made to engender a culture of peace has hardly been taken into account since conventional wisdom teaches us that because it is men who fight wars, it is men who (should) sit together and make peace. This is wrong because men make majority combatants when they have their womenfolk supporting them. Therefore it is important to explore the role of women in peace building through their knowledge in different spheres as this paper will do.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the nature of women's knowledge systems in pastoralist communities in relation to peace and security in West Pokot County, Kenya?
2. In what ways do Women's Knowledge Systems contribute to pastoralist livelihoods in relation to peace and security in West Pokot County, Kenya?
3. What are the challenges that women face as peace builders as they negotiate against patriarchal structures and institutions in West Pokot County, Kenya?

4. In what ways have the government and nongovernmental interventions initiated the Women's Knowledge Systems in peace and security issues in Kenya?

1.4 Justification of the Study

There is need for an inventory on Women's Knowledge System (WKS) on peace building like what exists in other domains, where policy makers can access it easily. This is why Women's Knowledge Systems are beginning to attract some attention in ways that recognize gender parity in knowledge production and need for collaborating in finding solutions to challenges that affect mankind (Bell, 1997). There is need for more information on women's knowledge systems in peace building in pastoralist livelihoods in order to have holistic solutions on matters of peace and security in Kenya. Much of the research on the role of women tends to focus on privileged and elite women and on mainstream economic and political issues but not on the periphery pastoralist women in peace and security issues as this study has done (Naomi & Ridgewell, 2008). The study, unlike many others considered everyday life as an avenue for learning and knowledge production that could be used to achieve larger societal goals. The study demonstrated that women are not voiceless as has been assumed by many scholars before. Their voices are articulated in various spaces which are regarded as private (Moore, 1988). These voices are coded and there is need to decode and encode them to allow participation in peace building.

2.1 Literature Review

Literature showed that women have played major roles that have sustained livelihoods in communities all over the world (Stichte, Sharon and Parpant, 1988). They have developed and used knowledge systems that are acquired through their experiences and stories to make meaning and negotiate for space and urgency in different societies. This paper illuminates the fact that in African cultures women have roles to play in peace efforts which have not been capitalized upon by western institutions involved in peace missions. Farty (1986) says that women have done this through great networks which act as a source of information and intermarriages which have helped them to play the role of intermediaries, mediators in peace and security issues and also serve as preemptors of violence. Farty continues to demonstrate that women and indigenous people in general are important references not only in peace building but also in general natural resource management.

3.0 Methodology

The study utilized an exploratory research design which allowed for the use of mixed methods approach. The study was however highly qualitative based on the age of the women that were targeted by the study (60 years and above). The instruments of data collection included questionnaires, Observation guides, In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as per Creswell, (2011). The study targeted all the residents of West Pokot County with a sample size of 250 respondents as proposed by Israel (1992). The study noted that the location and nature of the county allowed for both inter and intra ethnic conflicts. The harsh climatic conditions and unforgiving terrain has made the residents who depend on livestock to continuously compete for resources such as water and pasture. According to Fratkin (1998), cattle rustling and banditry which has resulted to loss of life and property has caused more conflict and it is important to understand the role of women in peace building in the area of study.

4.0 Findings and discussions

This study just like Badri and badri (1994) indicated that interpretation of the weather and climatic patterns for example makes women informed on whether they should prepare for the onset of rain or drought. The women observed the wind direction and accurately interpreted the weather for the preparation of the fields. The behavior of tree species such as the Nandi flame also informed of the weather patterns. Through many years of observing this tree, the study found out that women have generated a rich inventory of information which they can use to inform the right time to plant. The tree also allowed them to interpret whether there were any threats or opportunities by looking at the flowering patterns. One respondent said;

If you want to know if there will be rainfall you should find out where the wind is blowing from in the morning and in the evening. If the pattern is consistent for morning and evening i.e from the same direction, then there is likely to be rainfall in the next few days. However if the wind is directionless in the morning and evening, then there will be no rain in the next few days. In Pokot, the winds that bring the rain blow towards the escarpments (Respondent A, 2017).

The findings showed that women also used behavior and movement of birds, insects and animals (wild and domestic) as early warning for the onset of rains or drought.

On food production, the study found out that women were the end users of land in West Pokot. They were in charge of food security just as Amutabi (2012a) indicates that processing of food by women was through many years of experience, observation and practice. The number and size of granaries in a homestead were determined by women and they were an indication of food security. One of the respondents said;

In the past granaries were big and prevalent among the Pokot. Nowadays they are becoming smaller. Our mothers had many granaries for different crops. One of the granaries of the home would be left untouched for the time of scarcity. Only mothers knew this granary and that is why it is the women among the Pokot who gifts visitors and not the man because they know the needs and potential surplus of the family (Respondent B, 2017).

The Pokot women are aware of the significance of various agencies of food processing through experimentation. Indigenous fermented foods in West Pokot are derived from finger millet, sorghum, honey, milk and other local products because the women are aware of the balance of microorganisms involved in fermentation.

The study revealed that women were at the center of environmental preservation and conservation. This was done through rotation of crops, intercropping and utilization of the ecosystem for firewood, water and medicinal herbs. Women like Ma’Nyoru (the traditional herbalist and gynecologist) were able to treat their patients successfully using medicinal herbs. Hamasi (2016) indicates that medicinal herbs unlike modern medicine treat the body as one whole and that was why herbalists applied incantations and other devices of psychotherapeutic dimensions. Ma’Nyoru (not her real name) said;

In our culture there is no word for impotence and infertility as such. Women who cannot get children are simply encouraged to take medicinal herbs that enhance their fertility. These herbs are mixed with fat from sheep and given to the patient for at least two weeks. During this time the lady is encouraged to stay with the herbalist. This is because for the two weeks the herbalist also massages her fallopian tubes at dawn before she eats anything or talks to anybody. The massage is important because it removes any blockages that could be blocking the tubes (Ma’Nyoru, 2017).

On trade, the study found out that the women go beyond the mere exchange of goods and services and using their networks they gather intelligence on threats and opportunities for their communities. Unlike

what Kimokoti (1997) says that women play informal roles in the mining fields of Vihiga County, in West Pokot County, they use their networks to issue early warning to their relatives who will in turn pass the information to the village and clan elders. Market place is about prices and bargaining, negotiating and haggling and as a result women make friendship within and without the market space. Just like market women in Uganda according to Musisi (2001) women in West Pokot have developed soft skills and diplomacy than the men who are not patient enough to tap into the different attitudes of different people from different backgrounds. This has helped to keep the community stable through the interactions and long term relationships. One respondent said;

We met here and she told me to look for a bride for the brother. I looked around and brought that girl you are seeing there. She is a Marakwet married in Pokot. The whole process was planned here under the support and supervision of more elderly women who are not here today. Even there is a Pokot man who lost his wife during the raids. He had young children who were suffering, and when we stepped in we shared the story here and decided to get for him a wife from Marakwet. The man is now happily married and he thanks me everyday for doing the (Respondent C, 2017).

The Market place is a space in which new ideas and new products are almost launched through itinerant advertisers. According to (Hamasi, 2014) the market place is an important place for skills acquisition and knowledge because women deal with people from diverse cultures and this allows them to have a strong contextual approach to threats, anxieties and tensions.

4.2 Ways in which women negotiate culture in their efforts to ensure peace and security

Findings reveal that women have been able to locate themselves at important functions as custodians of food in the home which gives them critical negotiating power in society. Women have used their positions as matriarchs and managers of food to negotiate for space and agency in the Pokot society (Hamasi, 2017a). Women are able to negotiate in society in ways that allows them to be consulted and participate in decision making. Through this they are respected and regarded very highly by society. One respondent indicated;

If you see a successful Pokot family chances are very high that the matriarch is knowledgeable, skilled and dynamic. A lazy and weird matriarch implies unstable family and break up of such a family will be a natural thing. Women are respected because they hold the families together. Once the families are stable then we are sure of a stable clan and eventually a stable community (Respondent E, 2017).

The Matriarch is supposed to ensure food security, water and she is the chief protocol officer in the home. She has veto powers that influence the patriarchs to become the defacto leader of the family. According to (Ronke, 2013) such a woman becomes honorary man at the age of above 50 and begins to be listened to by both men and women and can hold dialogue with the community at large. In most cases women's voices are articulated through male relatives whom they have a lot of influence over.

Hamasi(2017b) observes that women carry the identity of the Pokot through their fashion of goat skin (*kararan*), *khanga*, *leketyo* and other jewelry and ornaments. In their form, *leketyo* has been used to break down barriers and penetrate areas that women could not reach with spoken words especially in a patriarchal community like Pokot. *Leketyo* is tied around the stomach on top of a *khanga* or *kararan* which makes it a public ornament that can speak to large crowds to which women disseminate their information on the need for everyone to maintain peace with each other. *Leketyo* has thus helped Pokot women to break up gender boundaries and navigate tight spaces and thus reduced cultural tensions. *Leketyo* should be viewed as a text because it presents knowledge on peace and security in a unique way.

4.3 Challenges facing women in their attempt to participate in peace and security issues in West

Pokot County

In West Pokot peace negotiations and mediation processes are dominated by men and this keeps women in the dark with regard to the next attack. As a result most of the victims of these attacks are women and children who are more often found in their spaces.

The social/political structure of the Pokot community is an inhibition to the women's participation in peace and conflict issues. The highest authority is made up of adult males who participate in decision making. As a result women do not participate in major disputes such as land even though they have an inventory on land boundaries not to mention that land is named after the principle wife like *kap Chebo Chepareria, Kap Chebo Irong* (of the wife from Endo/Irong).

The women face serious environmental inhibitions as they attempt to participate in peace and security issues. The land degradation through soil erosion, mining, deforestation and mudslides have denied women access to food production. The introduction of closure ranches according (Hamasi, 2018) has increased the domestic roles of women thus reducing their participation in community activities such as peace building.

Most women have been attacked by bandits and wild animals, bitten by snakes and even fallen on rocks hurting themselves in this harsh environment. High levels of patriarchy have seen women's rights violated through gender based violence.

4.4 Ways in which the government and nongovernmental organizations have involved women in peace and security issues

The study found out that the government has made attempts to implement the 2010 constitution, the vision 2030, the MDGs and the UNSC Resolution 1325 which requires that women be included in the agenda for peace. This has been done through the District Peace forums and through the *Nyumba Kumi* initiative. The study found out that in West Pokot the Peace forums comprised of 18 members from the Pokots and the Marakwet communities with 8 women (four from each side). The forum was found to appreciate the contribution of women in resolving and transforming conflict. One respondent said;

There can be no peace without women since they remain behind when the men go to fight and they take up family responsibility when men are killed in conflicts. Like in our committee we have two widows whose husbands were killed during the conflict. One of the women lost two of her sons in the same conflict. This is why we put them there because they are more interested in peace than men and they also understand the security issues more widely compared to men (Respondent G, 2017).

West Pokot has few seasonal rivers which usually suffer from flush floods rendering the county impassable. The women who must walk for long distances going to the market, looking for food, firewood and medicine suffer a lot during this time. The children also miss going to school while some are swept away by the floods. The government has embarked on building a bridge which serves as a land and connects women through their spaces throughout the year.

The Catholic Church and the African Inland Church have played a major role in peace building in this area. The churches have sponsored schools, build medical centers and guest houses for visitors in this county. The churches have also partnered with NGOs like World Vision- Kenya and the government in the fight against FGM. This has only had a head way after the inclusion of women by making them

understand the dangers of such a vice. Individuals like Hon. Lina Chebii of Elgeyo Marakwet have been on the forefront in fighting the vice through her initiative of *Tumondo Ne Leel* (cutting with the word).

Red Cross- Kenya has alleviated the water tensions by constructing a water pipe from Embobut forest to Lomut in West Pokot. The water pipe has relieved women who had to walk for over 20km looking for water. The water points established on the pipe after every 10km ensures that women from the two counties access water easily and at the same time continue to co-exist peacefully. Red Cross- Kenya has also ploughed 100hectares of land for the Pokots and 100hectares for the Marakwets to plant Maize. This is in their effort to improve on food security in the two counties while at the same time showing the communities the importance of large scale agriculture.

Individuals such as Tegla Lorupe have done a lot in terms of peace building and conflict reconstruction in Marakwet, West Pokot, Turkana and other pastoral areas in the greater East Africa. Through the Tegla Lorupe Foundation, peace races have been organized to encourage rebuilding of the relationships and understanding of others cultures. Exposure visits which have been organized by this foundation have encouraged cultural tolerance and appreciation. During the races, the foundation officials take time to sensitize the pastoral communities on the importance of surrendering illegal arms.

4.0 Recommendations of the study

From the findings of the study several recommendations were put forward following the objectives of the study. There needs to be a well thought out programme of collection of inventory of women's knowledge in the realm of peace and security to complement modern knowledge. The study recommended the need for well-planned government and non-government organizations policy on mainstreaming participation in issues of peace and security issues. There is need to create structures and institutions to incorporate women's voices and agency in peace and security matters. The ideals of UNSCR1325, Constitution 2010, SDGs and Vision 2030, should recognize the role of WKS in conflict prevention and resolution.

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